

It's Complicated!

Sermon by [Cynthia A. Jarvis](#)

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Jeremiah 31:15-17

Luke 19:41-44

“As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, ‘If you, even you, had only recognized the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes.’”

Last Sunday morning, I woke in Jerusalem. It was to be the fifth of six remarkable days in a land I have come to love. Whereas I had set out, four times before, to walk where Jesus walked, now I had come to listen to the lives of the disparate peoples who call this ancient land their home; I had come with the hope of understanding the things that might make for peace. In the hour following worship, I will introduce you to the people I met and tell you their stories. To give you a hint, the phrase uttered more often than any other was, “It’s complicated!” In this hour, however, and given the hopes and fears of all the years overtaking the whole of the Middle East, I am compelled to wrestle again with the peace that is both hidden from us and revealed in him who wept over Jerusalem.

Because Luke is the gospel writer who speaks most often of peace, it is to his gospel we turn this morning. The work of Jesus, according to Luke, is the gospel of peace. We would do well to remember that the peace of which Scripture speaks is not simply the absence of conflict nor is it brought about by the establishment of secure borders. Rather biblical peace is a life that is awash with well-being, full and whole and overflowing with God’s blessings. According to the psalmist, *shalom* is given at the crossroads where “steadfast love and faithfulness meet.” In contrast to the inner peace promised by today’s popular spirituality, *shalom* is harmonious community. “When we look at the soul,” writes Old Testament theologian Johannes Pederson, “we always see a community rising behind it. What it is, it is by virtue of others.”

There are three places in Luke’s gospel where the subject of peace is paramount: at the birth of Jesus, in the sending out of the disciples and finally as Jesus enters Jerusalem. In each context, says my New Testament professor and Jesuit priest John Donahue, peace is where the gospel is in motion and where barriers are broken down.

We begin, then, with the infancy narratives. Three times peace, *shalom*, the fullness of life is announced to characters with no future: to a barren couple; a virgin and a soon to be presumed cuckold; a priest and prophetess, each with one foot in the grave. So the once childless Zechariah sings of the peace his son will herald in the muddy Jordan River (where one of our number was baptized last week...again): “By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.” Isaiah said as much to God’s people in exile. Next, a multitude of heavenly host surrounds shepherds abiding in the fields, singing “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” Finally Simeon chants the *Nunc Dimittis*, “Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all thy peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to thy people Israel.”

The God who is about to enter human history as the revelation of *shalom* to those denied the fullness of life--the barren, the poor, and unclean gentiles from all nations together with God's people Israel—is the same God who once heard the cries of God's people in Egypt and entered human history to deliver them. Noting the irenic posture of Luke toward the people of Israel (in sharp contrast, I might add, to John!), Donahue lauds Luke's insistence that an increasingly Gentile community never forget its Jewish heritage. Simeon's song anticipates the words of Ephesians, identifying Christ as "our peace who has made us [Jew and Gentile] both one and broken down the dividing wall of hostility."

As we drew near to Bethlehem last Saturday, a dividing wall of security to some and of hostility to others came into view. The wall literally divides Israel from the West Bank, Jerusalem from Bethlehem. No doubt the wall has secured the borders, has put an end to suicide bombers, has created some sense of well-being on the streets of Jerusalem. No doubt the same wall has fueled hostility, has increased the sense of isolation, has garnered sympathy in the world for the little town of Bethlehem. But peace, community, the fullness of life Messiah will bring? *Shalom* was hid from our eyes. It's complicated.

In the second place, peace surrounds the sending out of the twelve and the many in the middle of Luke's gospel as Jesus sets his face toward Jerusalem. Their instructions are to go out to every town in the Galilee as "lambs in the midst of wolves." Jesus sends them as he has been sent: defenseless. They are harbingers of the peaceable kingdom foretold by Isaiah where "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb." As they enter each house, the twelve are to say "Peace be to this house." The greeting is no perfunctory "Hello"! Rather their words announce "the coming of [Messiah] *within* history [and] signal the advent of *shalom*, peace, God's blessing, in the same way the heavenly messengers heralded his coming *to* history with a proclamation of peace."

I believe we glimpsed the advent of this peace in the Galilee as we watched the youngest members of an Interfaith Youth Circus spin saucers, ride unicycles, juggle balls and, in so doing, expand space in the world for being human in. Rabbi Marc Rosenstein, a former Philadelphian, runs Makom ba-Galil, a center that fosters pluralism and coexistence among Israeli Jews, Arabs and Christians. Consider, he said, the Arab teenage boy who said to a Jewish teenage girl that she deserved to be beaten; she returned the insult and thus began a relationship that now finds them catching one another on the flying trapeze. To my Christian eyes, here the gospel is on the move; barriers are being broken down even though it is still complicated.

It has, in fact, always been complicated. A few chapters after the sending of the twelve, Jesus explodes: "Do you think I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division." Here, says Donahue, the peace Jesus rejects is the peace promoted by the militant messianic movements of his time, a peace that would rest on "the exclusion of the sinner from the holy community and the expulsion of the foreigner from the land, often by armed conflict in the name of the Lord." Like Jeremiah before him, who attacked the so-called prophets of his time saying "Peace, peace" when there was only "a hollow security built on injustice", Jesus says no to the peace achieved through sectarian violence, himself about to become its victim. Divisions arise, therefore, because he associates with sinners, the Roman centurion, the Samaritan, tax collectors. *Shalom*, the gospel of peace he inaugurates, paradoxically, divides us still.

In the same region we visited an Arab Christian village and listened to Fr. Nadeem Chacour, a Melkite priest who was removed from his family home outside Jerusalem in 1948 and told, along with the whole village, that they could return in two weeks.

As he put it, “We are still waiting.” Like many Arabs, he was displaced so that the Jewish state, mandated by the United Nations, could be established for the remaining Jews who, having been displaced from their villages and having survived the ovens, had no place to lay their heads. How often we heard two narratives of the same experience, each speaking contradictory truths; how was it that shalom was glimpsed as the other’s narrative was embraced? Fr. Chacour has committed himself, in the meantime which has become his lifetime, to interfaith dialogue and to the promotion of reconciliation between Arab and Jew. Still he waits for *shalom*, for the peaceable kingdom to be made manifest in the village of his birth. Still he lives in hope. It’s complicated!

Finally we come to the third place in Luke where peace is the predominate theme. On a donkey (the symbol of one arriving in peace), Jesus travels down the narrow road from Bethany and over the Mount of Olives to shouts of, “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord!” Then Luke alone adds, “Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” The words are the same words sung by the heavenly host at his birth, enclosing Jesus’ public ministry with acclamations of peace. But, according to Luke, as he draws near to the city gate, he weeps, saying, “Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. Indeed, the days will come upon you when your enemies will set up ramparts around you and surround you and hem you in on every side. They will crush you to the ground, you and your children within you, and they will not leave within you one stone upon another.”

In the year 70 A.D., the city fell and the temple was destroyed. No doubt all this had already taken place by the time Luke writes his gospel. Therefore from the perspective of Luke’s audience, Jesus’ lament was for a city in ruins, laid waste by imperial Rome just as the city and temple had been destroyed six hundred years earlier by Babylon. The tears at that time were Jeremiah’s, the prophet called out by God to halt Judah’s march toward war against the Babylonians. Irrational as it sounded, the refusal to take up arms against the enemy was the way of God’s peace, said Jeremiah. Judah rejected the words of the prophet and revolted against Babylon, leaving Jerusalem destroyed and sending the people of Judah to weep by the waters of Babylon. Foolish as it was 600 years later and still is today, the cross and so submission to the enemy that was death would prove death’s defeat, would reveal the fullness of life that is *shalom*. But if it is submission to the other who wills your destruction, if this is what makes for *shalom*, a people other than the people who have survived the *Shoah* must first be claimed by the peace that passes understanding.

Last Sunday I woke in Jerusalem where the tears were to be mine. After breakfast we met Rabbi Seth Mandell and his wife Sherri. In 2001, their 13-year-old son Koby and his friend Yosef were stoned to death in a cave outside their West Bank settlement in Tekoa. “Koby’s death” writes Sherri in *The Blessing of a Broken Heart*, “is a Biblical death. It is a murder that is shocking in its raw pain, its unmediated cruelty. Two Jewish boys...attacked in a cave by Arab terrorists, and bludgeoned to death with stones the size of bowling balls. I can’t think about a murderer pummeling my child to death with rocks. I don’t know how to cope with the pain and evil. I imagine my son afraid, crying out, dying alone, in horror and agony. A thirteen-year-old boy.

“Anachronistic, primitive in its horror, the murder harkens back to the first murder in the world. In his jealousy, Cain slew his brother Abel with stones, and the Bible tells us that ‘his blood cried out from the ground.’” It cries out still.

What I gave up this week was any illusion that I know the things that make for

peace. Those things are hid from my eyes, eyes that can only see the complexity of a land inhabited by the peoples of God whose tragic narratives preclude the harmonious community that is *shalom*. That said, I believe the peace once announced to the shepherds in the hills outside the little town of Bethlehem and the peace let loose upon inhabitants of the Galilee long ago by twelve defenseless disciples and the peace of him who wept over Jerusalem and died outside the city walls that death will have no dominion is the peace all peoples and all nations are destined to know. Until that day, I know only enough to pray for the peace of Jerusalem.